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## **A Universal and personal art through tradition and invention**

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**ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Fine and Applied Arts  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**A UNIVERSAL AND PERSONAL ART  
THROUGH TRADITION AND INVENTION**

**By**

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**May 20, 1990**



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## I INTRODUCTION

In a time when people are overwhelmed by the abundance of visual art and media, I have purposely created an art that is more universal and personal in an attempt to bridge the gap that exists between the people outside the art world, and those within it. Through my thesis I have examined the fundamentals of art making in order to develop an image that is representative of many past concerns, yet reflective of contemporary ideas and feelings. The traditional elements I have maintained reintroduce essential aspects of art making. They build on history and provide stability and a connecting thread for the viewer. This is important in restoring faith among artists, critics, and audiences. The less conventional, more inventive components present an element of intrigue and surprise without playing upon the sensationalism that so much of the contemporary art world relies on. This combination of tradition and invention is my greatest achievement because it enables me to create an image that is charged with my ideas and emotions, yet capable of allowing the observer to bring to the piece his or her own thoughts and experiences. These two values, tradition and invention, are the core to my creative process and give reason to everything I make. My primary means of expressing tradition and invention is through

the examination and manipulation of (1) the human form, (2) the formal elements of art, and (3) human emotions.

## II THE HUMAN FORM

The figure is still the only thing I have faith in in terms of how much emotion it's charged with and how much subject matter is there.<sup>1</sup>

The human form has continually captivated me, and consistently surfaced in my work. Initially my exploration of the figure began as a formal challenge, an examination of form in space. Figurative art of the Renaissance period and mannerism always fascinated me. However, I was never really concerned with the likeness or personality of the individual, or the context of a narrative. To me the figure was not a person. It was a tool, a vehicle used to achieve an aesthetic goal.

As I further questioned my intentions in my art, I realized my interest and reasons for painting the figure are more pluralistic and its potentials endless. In addition to its complexity and its ability to provide meaning and understanding to a diverse audience, the human body possesses a unique sensual and expressive character. It is for me, more dynamic than any other thing is capable of being. One needs

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<sup>1</sup>Constance W. Glenn, Jim Dine Figure Drawings 1975-1979 (New York; Harper & Row Publishers, Inc. 1979). 19.

to only look at the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) to comprehend the expressiveness of a single human gesture. Toulouse-Lautrec had the gift of that special penetrating eye that so accurately determined the most essential ingredient to each gesture. "None saw better than he the elements of permanence in the ever-rolling stream of time."<sup>2</sup> His continuous search for the moment, when human nature reveals stark reality, and his ability to capture this truth in only a few significant motions is what initially inspired me. His excellence is what ignited my quest to determine the essentials in expressing through the figure.

As I began to feel confident with expression through the figure and gesture, I began to make alterations in my technique. The most obvious change was in scale. I started a large scale series of figure paintings. (fig. 5-8) It is this series that opened my mind to new representations of the traditional theme. These large paintings forced me to look at the figure differently, in new perspectives and new spaces. The size did not enable me to approach the figure as in the past and it required new solutions to familiar problems of

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Skira, Lautrec Taste of Our Time (Geneva; Albert Skira, 1944) 9.

figure ground. What evolved is a much more interesting resolution to the human form. The paintings were no longer simply figures in environments. They transformed into fields of color, shape and line. I manipulated the anatomy to fit the surface area and the limbs and angles of the body became more dynamic forms and shapes which built the structure of these gigantic figurative monuments. The monumentality of the images engulf the observer and intensify the impact of the piece. The physical impact of such works is instantaneous, but they reveal themselves only over time as formal and emotional relationships are perceived.

I also explored an intimate small series of collaged black and white monoprints. (fig. 16-20) This different scale forced me to comprise different visual solutions. The necessary exaggeration of the figure to fit the large scale canvas communicates an entirely different message than the miniature more simplified printmaking series. Besides making the work more inventive and unique, these results encouraged me to further challenge the images formally.



### III THE FORMAL ELEMENTS

I think it is unhealthy to cut off history, to not quote from history. I stopped everything and went back, as it were, to draw the figure in 1975. I put a stop to my so-called art and tried to sit with myself and look harder. I taught myself to look, to develop the tools to eventually make something that would be more meaningful. All this is just leading up to what I'm trying to do, which is not an attempt to bring back realism. I want a healthy, big art.<sup>3</sup>

The formal elements of art have always been a primary concern to me. I pride myself in the fact that all my images are based on what I feel is a traditional approach to form. By this I mean that, I believe my most powerful art reflects a concern for aesthetics, craftsmanship, creativity, and theory. This is not to say a work of art should be equally based on all of these aspects, for these components can vary in degree. Art can even be void of each of these qualities. However to be a successful statement, it must be or become a sincere decision to exclude it.

In terms of craftsmanship and technique, my approach remains primarily traditional. With a few exceptions (fig.

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<sup>3</sup> Constance W. Glen, 13, 17.



6, 15-20) the majority of my work is oil on canvas, pastel and charcoal on paper, and printmaking. Any work that strays from the more conventional approach is usually experimental or a step in moving my traditional work towards a new direction. This is temporary in order to resolve the problem in the future, in a more conventional manner. I find devising a conventional solution now, is a great challenge due to all the conventional solutions we have experienced in the history of art. Unfortunately it seems many contemporary artists use less conventional processes as a "crutch" for technique and craftsmanship rather than as a creative solution. Not everything that has not been done yet will make for a successful solution to the challenge of technique.

However, the specifics of form, my use of line, color and composition, are less conventional. It is through these elements that I develop a formal signature, a uniqueness about the images that make visual art a meaningful, inventive experience for myself. The manipulation of line, color, and composition brings me closer to the experience of art making, and further from just observing it. A creative approach to the manipulation of form, and what occurs aesthetically takes precedent over theory in my art.

In a true dialogue between the draftsman and the unyielding object, the line in response will totter and flash across the page from one point to another, reach the edge of the form like an out-of-breath swimmer who has more despair than strength in his stroke. The page looks ridiculously alive.<sup>4</sup>

My exploration of line has been a constant learning experience. It began as an illustrational tool, changed rapidly into an expressive rhythmic pattern of energy vibrating across the surface and has finally transformed itself into its most successful purpose, that of confidence, information, and emotion. Most significant is my strategy of how much not to say in order to use line in the most effective way. The careful distinction of where to use line, and where to eliminate it, is what gives the figures their freshness. What edges need to be defined through line, and which can be defined through another means? A drawing should not be an outline. It should be a journey through the artists' experience and their creative thought. It should be capable of unfolding the livlihood of its subject through careful evaluation of its qualities. "Not everything we put down deserves the honor, particularly when competence makes it

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<sup>4</sup>James Thrall Soby, Rico Lebrun Drawings (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961) 24

almost good by leaning on what we knew yesterday."<sup>5</sup> A careful selection of line makes the chosen more expressive than if it were surrounded by similar marks. The observer is able to isolate the marks. They are not only marks that suggest a form, but also marks expressive and suggestive of other things: energy, emotion, tension.

In the paintings the most rewarding mark making has been by drawing with China marker, solvents and rags (fig. 1-9). Initially drawing came easier in the monoprints. A simple mark made by wiping ink off the plate with a Q-tip could in an instant form a thigh, the spine, or an entire gesture. To create the same significance in the paintings I needed to follow my natural instincts of mark making and look at the model less, and the painting more. I needed to abandon some of the academics in order to invent in paint. I definitely did not want to further develop an ordinary kind of brushstroke. The China marker, solvents, and rags enable me to approach the eight foot painting like the page of a sketchbook. The drawing process becomes rapid and spontaneous and the line is dynamic and selective.

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<sup>5</sup>James Thrall Soby, 32.

I feel any color I pick up I must make do a good job. That's when the invention takes place, that's when it becomes mine.<sup>6</sup>

I do not want color relationships to be predictable. We exist in such a vibrant world that I need to constantly examine color theories. I like to use color to heighten the tension in areas and calm the tension in other areas of the piece. Technically, I do most of my mixing on the pallet. I do this to prevent the colors from getting muddy, and also to prevent myself from acting impulsively. What looks good on the pallet may not work on the painting when considering what surrounds it. Color has become a much more analytical process for me. My pallet has become more sophisticated due to the mixing that occurs before it is applied. Any mixing that takes place on the canvas is the result of layering washes. The pigment underneath affects the upper layers and the result is a rich field. In some areas I will apply the same color five to eight times in order to achieve that same richness: for example, in fig.(5) the upper right, light blue area; and in fig.(7), the upper left warm black area. In areas that I hope to draw attention to I usually apply bold colors, or a

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<sup>6</sup> Constance W. Glenn. 18.

complementary color relationship to heighten the tension. (fig. 6, the green and red area) In areas that do not require as much attention due to the activity of line, shape, or composition, I will apply less vibrant colors, or analogous color schemes.

Compositionally the work is extremely demanding and dynamic. Because of the different scales of the work, I must "completely" consider the composition. I've frequently used the edges of my surface to create inventive, unpredictable solutions to space; cutting the figure and environment in unordinary locations in order to open the space, using the figure's limbs and gesture to create intersecting diagonals and angles, suggesting perspective and depth and denying it within the same work to develop illusions, and finally, creating shadows and light sources to alter visual directions and to divide the negative space into more interesting shapes. All of these techniques work together to make a work that is inventive compositionally.

The combination of my methods of line, color, and composition give my work its "signature." The strongest examples of this "signature" is a 26" x 40" drawing series



that I worked on simultaneously during the paintings and prints. (fig. 10-15) It is through this series that I realized the culmination of these formal qualities, and understood their potential when applied to all my images. These charcoal and pastel drawings are the first drawings that I successfully pushed beyond the usual limits of a typical figure study. It is this series that proved a unique approach and combination of line, color, and composition is capable of introducing an inventive solution to emotion.

#### IV HUMAN EMOTION

Wherever people love one another something very sad remains. Life remains always life to live, and so is earth-bound. Perhaps, for that very reason, life is all the more beautiful, for it is always permeated with this sadness. Why do tears run down people's faces just when they see the most basic human sights? Because to become one with the earth is the most frightening reality.<sup>7</sup>

Emotion, my final means of expressing tradition and invention, is for me the most interesting quality to examine and manipulate. Human emotion has always interested me personally, and artistically. Through my research and images, I have learned that emotion can be expressed through art on many different levels. Because of the extensive examples of emotion in art, I have narrowed my research down to the applications that most excite me. I refer to these as "physical" and "formal" emotion. The figure drawings of Jim Dine (1975-1979) are works that I feel successfully examine and depict these two types of emotion.

First and most familiar is what I call the "physical" emotion in Dine's work. By this I am referring to the obvious expressiveness of his own emotions. They begin as inner emotions, and are transferred onto the paper physically.

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<sup>7</sup> Martha Kearns, Kathe Kollwitz Woman and Artist (New York; Gallerie St. Etienne, 1987) 119.

"I am positive that by rubbing out and trying to do better, and knowing that I can do better, the whole drawing gains a kind of history and substance that it did not have before."<sup>8</sup> Dine does a great deal of finishing work and ending of the drawing when no one is there. He changes and reworks the image sometimes to the extent of removing an entire area, totally, and replacing it with something else. He leaves original marks of drawn anatomy and figures in the image and will redraw the new gesture in what he feels is a more appropriate way. He actually sandpapers areas of the surface away. This gives the observer the opportunity to see the transformation of the artist's emotions into a physical action. The viewer can better relate to and be a part of the emotional experience as a whole.

Through my own work I have always felt that the obvious reworking of an image and an idea is the most exciting and educational experience. The erasers, solvents, and rags are as significant as the charcoal and paint. The reworked areas, where I put translucent washes over marks, or confidently redraw, are what bring the works alive.

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<sup>8</sup>Constance W. Glenn. 13.



More complex and unique is Dine's application of what I call "formal" emotion. This quality has had a major impact on my thinking and the influence is obvious in my images.

"I like the invention. The ability to improvise and invent."<sup>9</sup> Emotion can be expressed without being obvious, symbolic, or sensationalist. Because so much of the work we see now allows for less analysis or personal interpretation, it is refreshing to view a work that is suggestive. This suggestion can be achieved formally through line, color and composition. By doing something unique, and challenging the work formally -- for example, putting areas of vibrant pattern adjacent to areas of black and white exaggerated figures (fig. 2, 10-20) having areas of detail within areas of little detail; hyping edges in areas vs. eliminating edge; and using high contrast and complementary colors with subtle analogous color relationships -- "formal emotion" is achieved. The work presents a contrast that increases the tension in the image and provokes some type of an emotional response within the viewer. This more innovative, intellectual type of human

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<sup>9</sup>Constance W. Glenn. 18.

emotion lends itself to the idea of invention and is one of the primary directions that I intend to pursue in my work.

## V CONCLUSION

My images are evidence that a work of art that is traditional in some aspects, and inventive in others, can be a large step toward bridging the gap between artists and audience. It can provide a necessary connecting thread to the public and still prove personal and sincere. This type of work helps to ease the shock of the overwhelming abundance of art in the twentieth century. It intrigues, informs and provokes. With confidence and commitment, the work is more meaningful for the viewer and more significant an art experience for myself.

## PLATES

- 1 "I Will Overcome" 1989  
oil on canvas, 31" x 43"
- 2 "Resting on a Bed of Flowers" 1989  
oil on canvas, 48" x 71"
- 3 "Funeral of Friends" 1990  
oil on canvas, 48" x 71"
- 4 "Volunteer" 1989  
oil on canvas, 23" x 47"
- 5 "Amputee Nurse" 1989  
oil on canvas, 48" x 96"
- 6 "Disrobe" 1990  
oil on canvas, 96" x 60"
- 7 "Inner City Soul" 1990  
oil on canvas, 48" x 96"
- 8 "Waking Child 1990  
oil on canvas, 48" x 96"
- 9 "Turkey Man" 1990  
oil on canvas, 48" x 71 "
- 10 "Three Shades in a Row" 1989  
pastel, 26" x 40"
- 11 "Death in the Room" 1989  
pastel, 26" x 40"
- 12 "Coming Into Me" 1989  
pastel, 26" x 40"
- 13 "Inner City Setting" 1989  
pastel, 26" x 40"
- 14 "Changing Ground" 1990  
pastel, 26" x 40"
- 15 "The Roach Lady" 1990  
pastel, 26" x 40"

- 16 "Double Edge" 1989  
collage/monoprint on handmade paper, 11" x 14"
- 17 "Restrained" 1989  
collage/monoprint on handmade paper, 14" x 11"
- 18 "Through the Window" 1990  
collage/monoprint on handmade paper, 14" x 11"
- 19 "Jandrue" 1990  
collage/monoprint on handmade paper, 11" x 14"
- 20 "Peeper" 1989  
collage/monoprint on handmade paper, 11" x 7"

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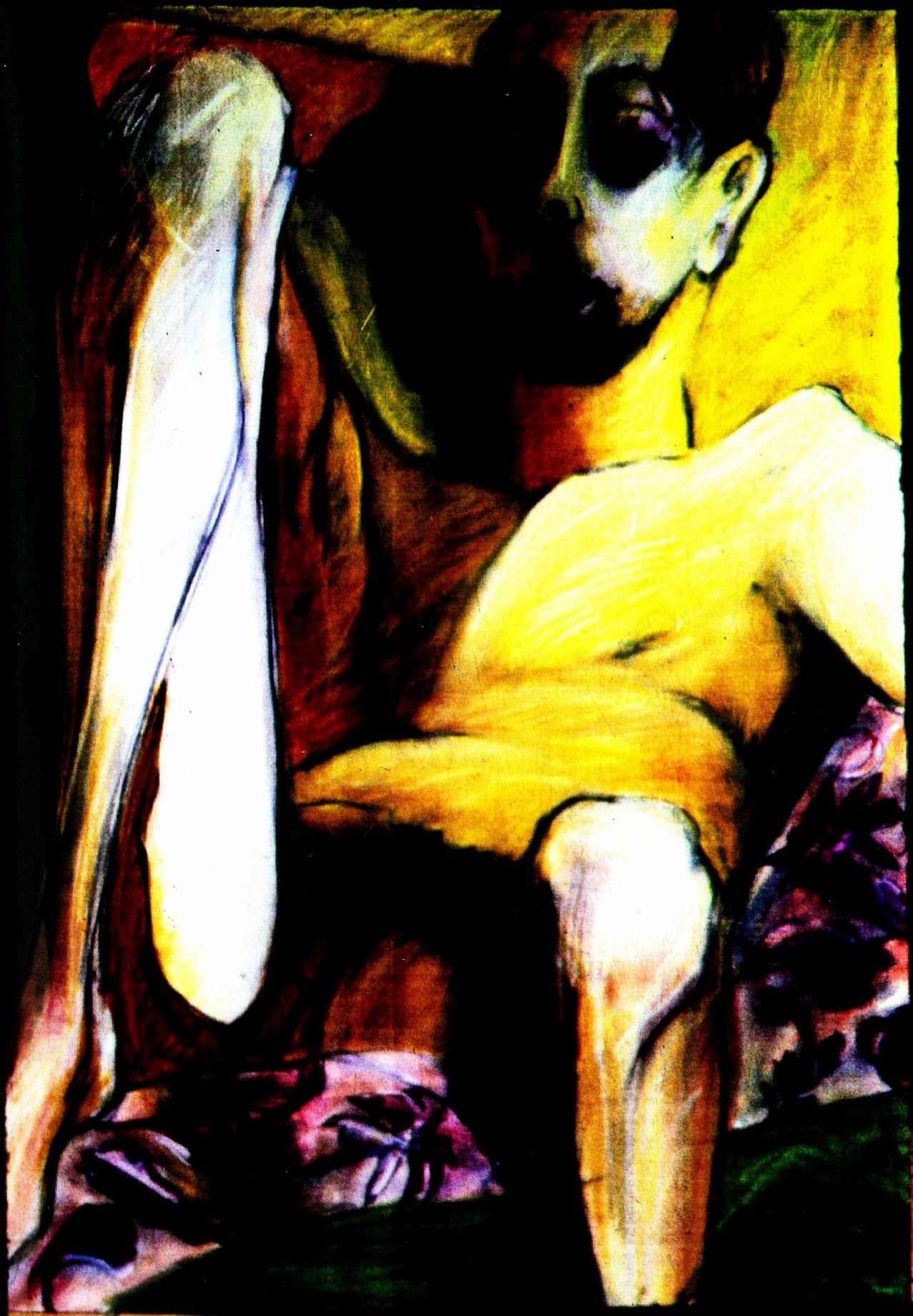


Fig. 1 "I Will Overcome" 1989  
oil on canvas, 31"x43"





Fig. 2 "Resting on a Bed of Flowers"  
1989, oil on canvas, 48"x71"





Fig. 3 "Funeral of Friends" 1990  
oil on canvas, 48"x71"





Fig. 4 "Volunteer" 1989  
oil on canvas, 23"x47"



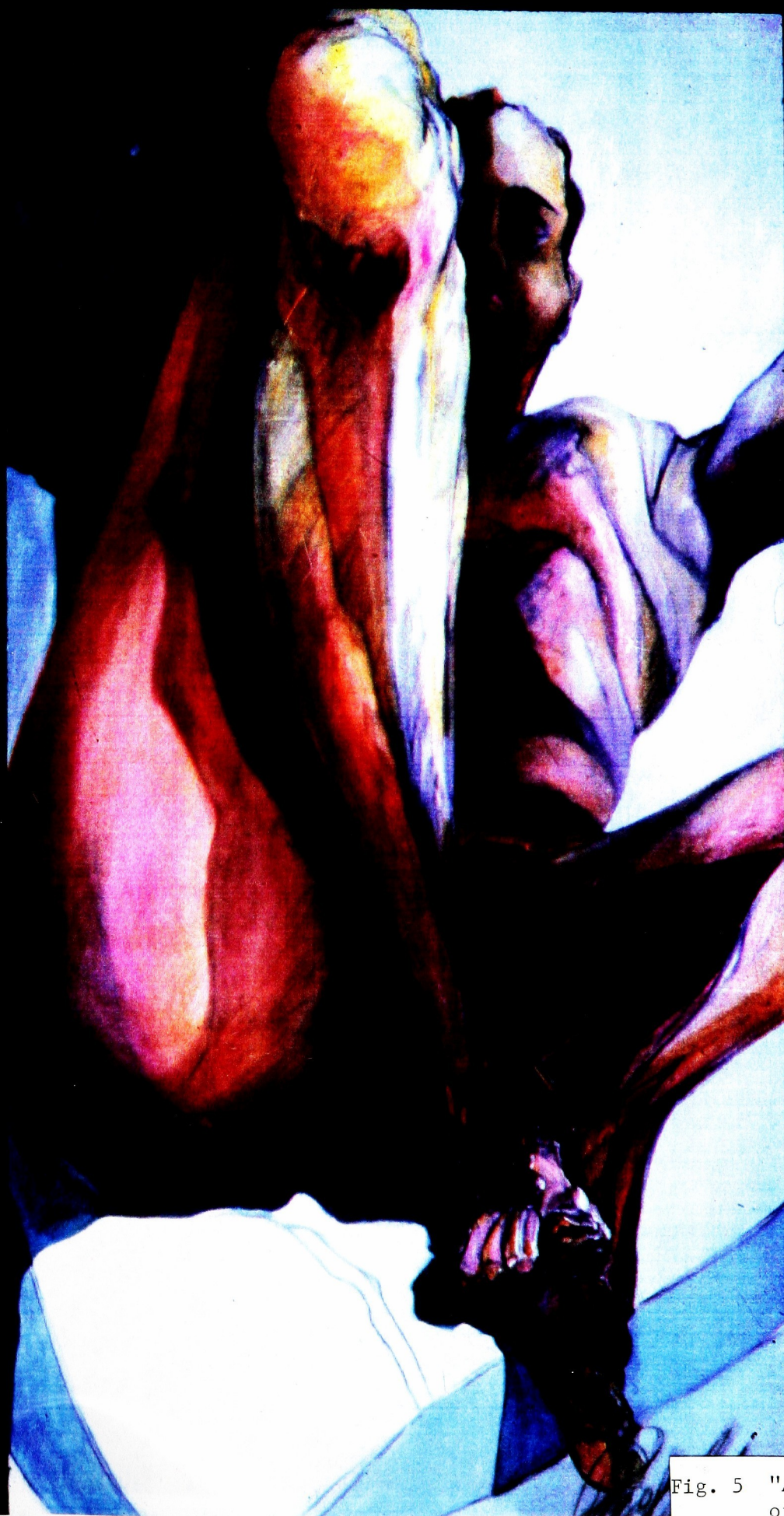


Fig. 5 "Amputee Nurse" 1989  
oil on canvas, 48"x96"





Fig. 6 "Disrobe" 1990  
oil on canvas, 96"x60"



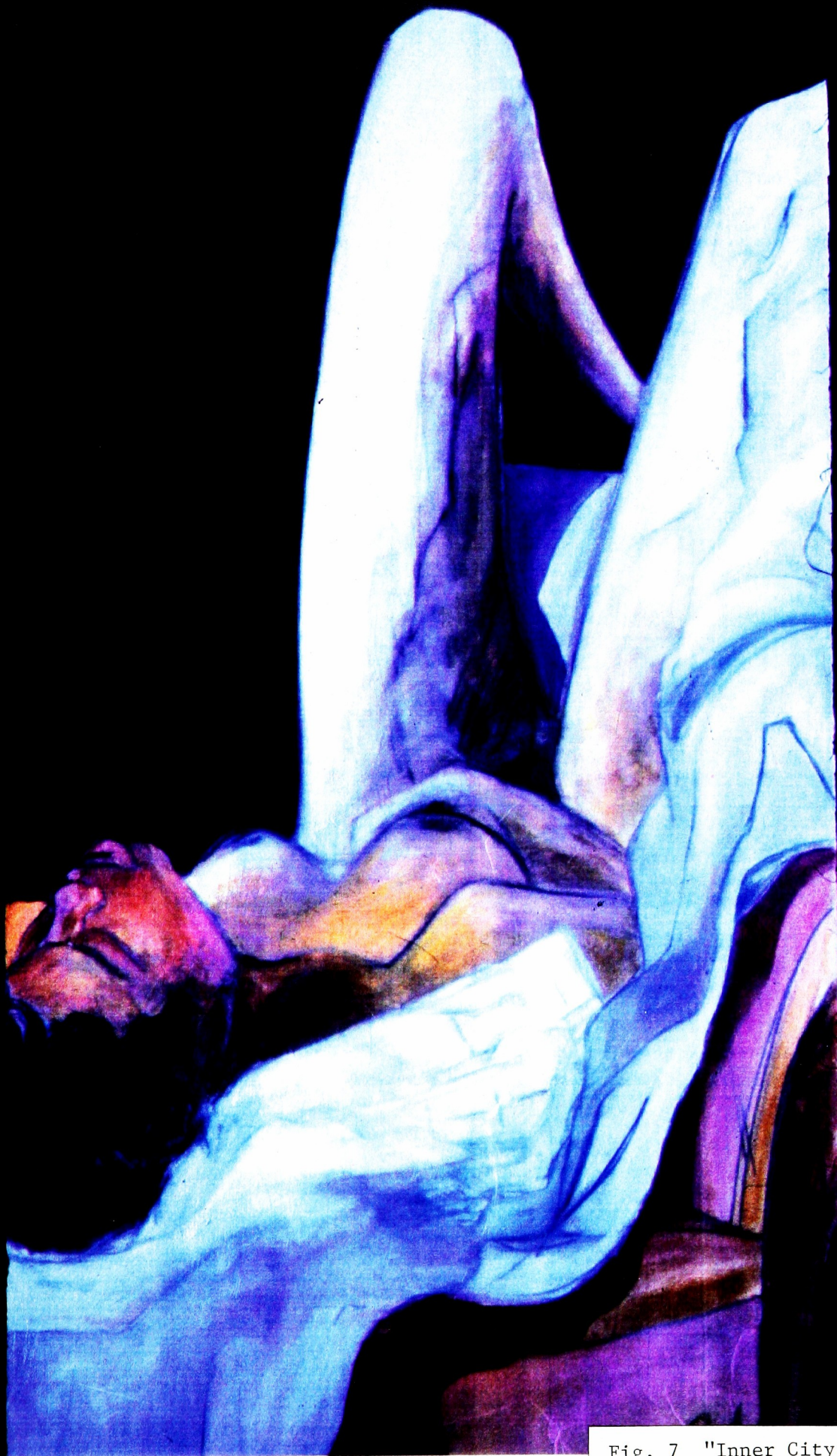


Fig. 7 "Inner City Soul" 1990  
oil on canvas, 48"x96"





Fig. 8 "Waking Child" 1990  
oil on canvas, 96"x48"



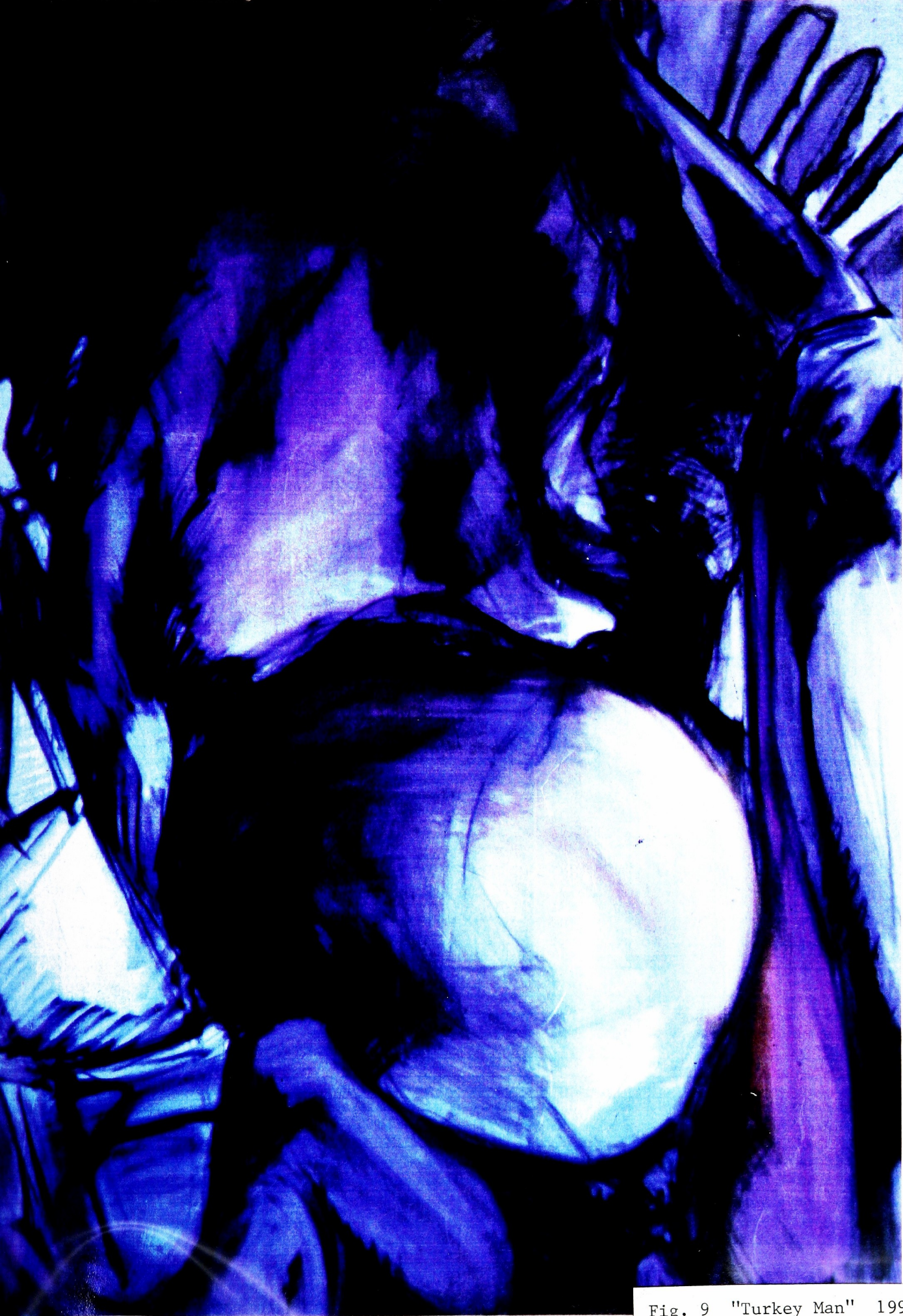


Fig. 9 "Turkey Man" 1990  
oil on canvas, 48"x71"



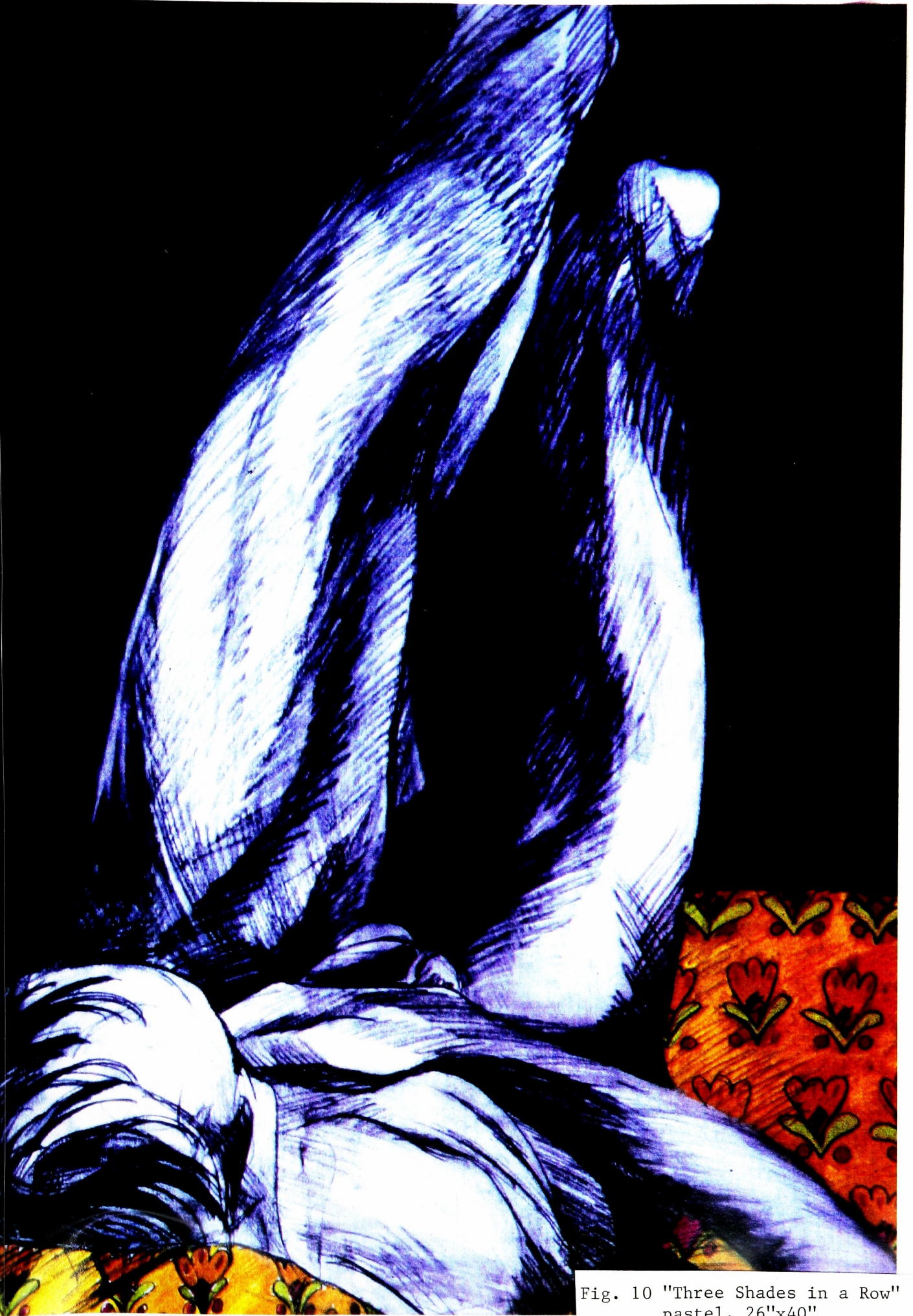


Fig. 10 "Three Shades in a Row" 1989  
pastel, 26"x40"





Fig. 11 "Death in the Room" 1989  
pastel, 26"x40"





Fig. 12 "Coming Into Me" 1989  
pastel, 26"x40"



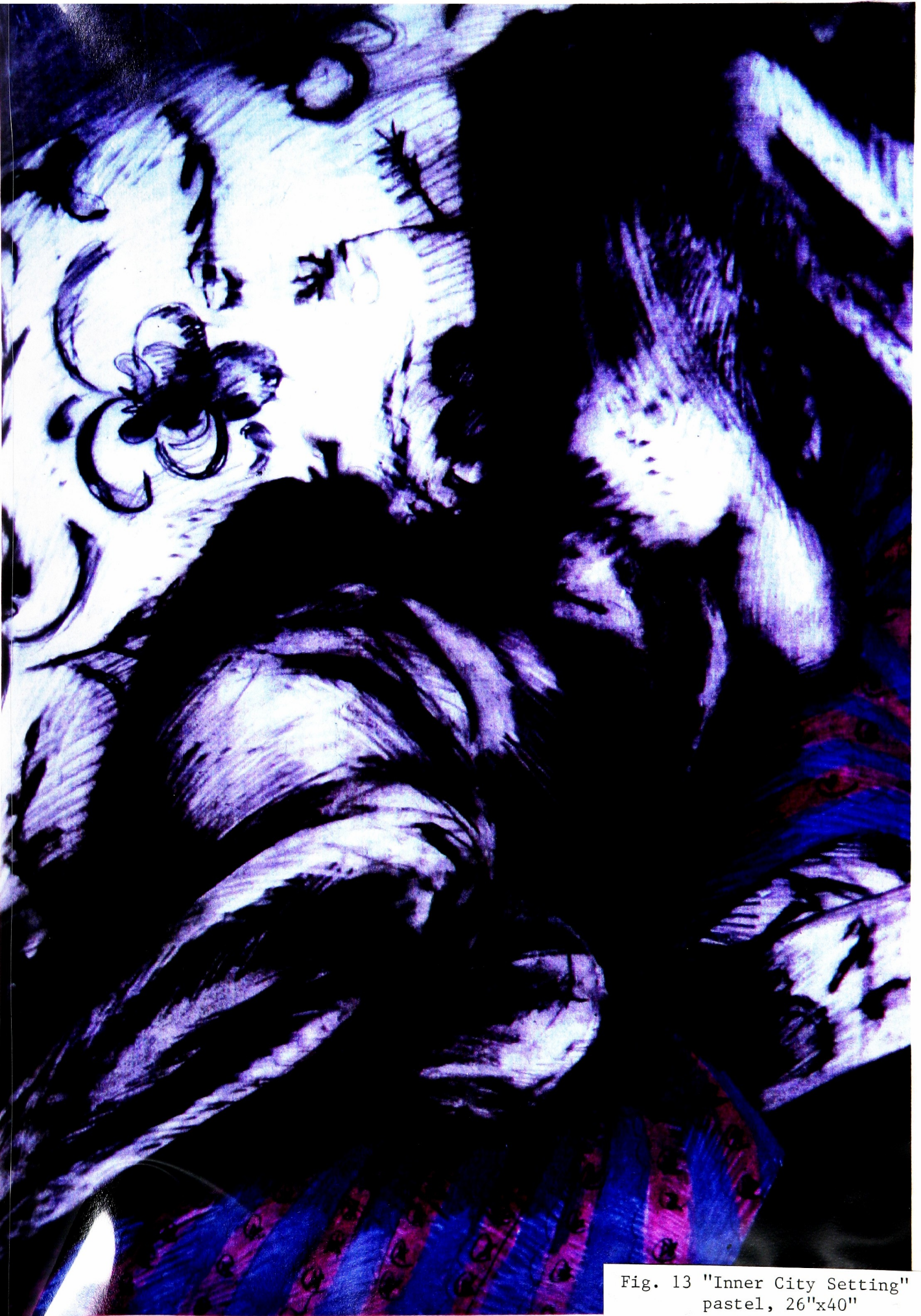


Fig. 13 "Inner City Setting" 1989  
pastel, 26"x40"





Fig. 14 "Changing Ground" 1990  
pastel, 26"x40"





Fig. 15 "The Roach Lady" 1990  
pastel, 26"x40"





Fig. 16 "Double Edge" 1989  
collage/monoprint, 11"x14"





Fig. 17 "Restrained" 1989  
collage/monoprint, 14"x11"



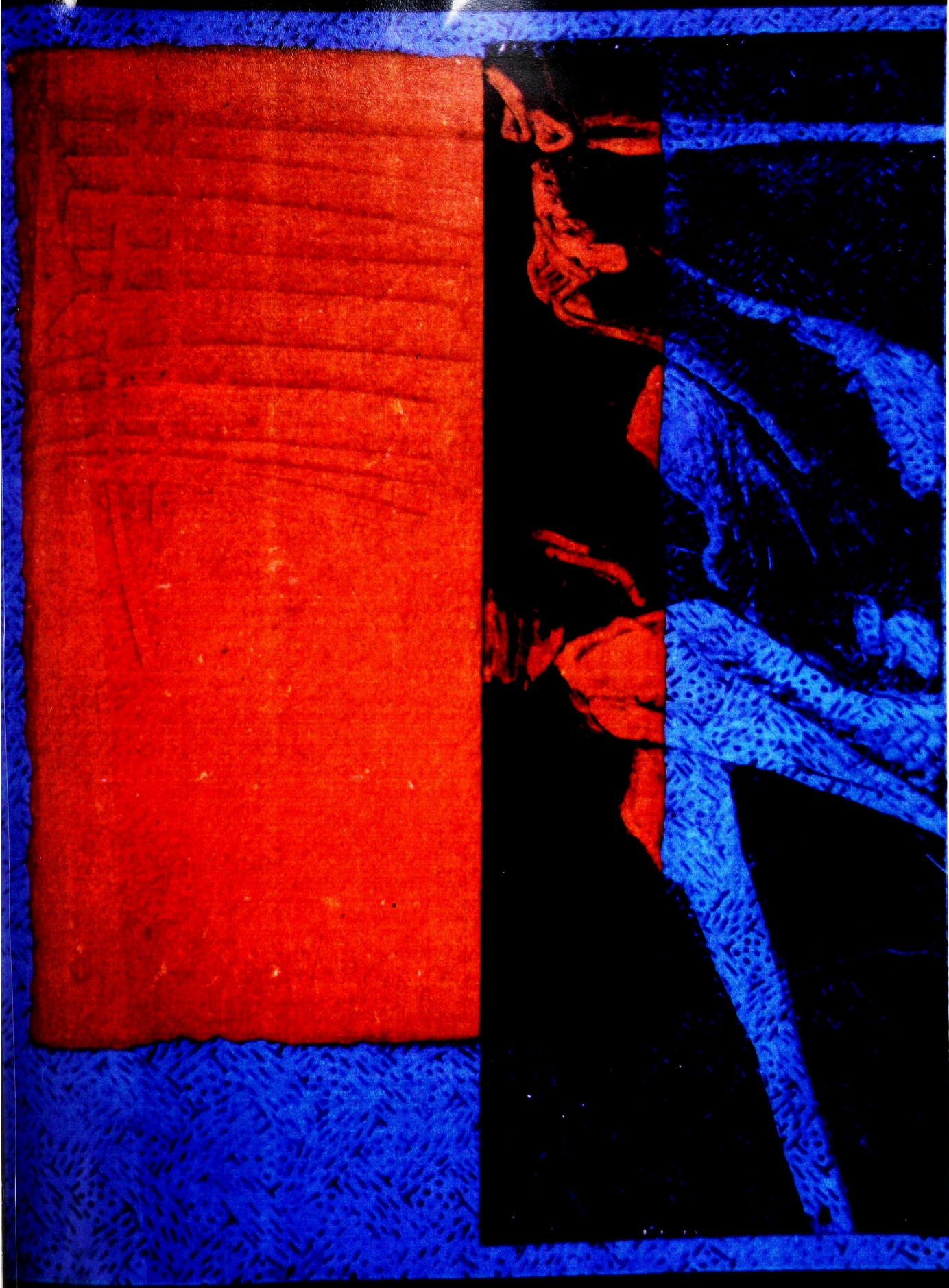


Fig. 18 "Through the Window" 1990  
collage/monoprint, 14"x11"





Fig. 19 "Jandrue" 1990  
collage/monoprint





Fig. 20 "Peeper" 1990  
collage/monoprint, 11"x7"